Epiphany 5

February 7, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

Whenever I read today’s Gospel text, I have to remind myself that it’s unfair and unhelpful to judge people from the past by today’s standards.

I’ll admit that reading about the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law sometimes bothers me. Jesus heals her and she immediately gets up and, what…makes dinner?

I find myself bristling over the limitations some people have placed on others — not just for centuries, but millennia. I get indignant, thinking about the gifts those people weren’t allowed to fully embrace.

And that’s when I have to take a step back.

Yes, the culture of Jesus’ time placed limits on what women could do. Getting annoyed by it is unhelpful. Learning from it is what can bear fruit.

Humanity is a work in progress. We have always struggled to understand how to love one another as ourselves, and we probably always will, until the day when God concludes this grand experiment and brings all of creation to the fullness God intends for it.

That instinct some of us have to bristle over 2000-year old gender roles can keep us from appreciating what being healed meant for Simon’s mother-in-law. She got a second chance at life.

Having been cured of an illness that very well could have resulted in her death, she is not just healthy again. She’s restored to her family. She’s restored to her community. She’s given the opportunity to respond to what Jesus has done for her by living out her faith as fully as possible, using the gifts that God gave her in service to her family and her neighbors and her God.

Simon’s mother-in-law, having been raised up from perhaps near death, took on a path of discipleship. She served God in the person of Jesus and she served others. We do her a disservice if we assume that she made them dinner simply because that’s what women were supposed to do.

From the moment Jesus took her hand and raised her up, she was a disciple. She served God by serving those around her.

Perhaps what we’re meant to see here is that God acts in ways intended to allow us to be who we’re created to be. It is through Christ that God demonstrates most clearly how we are to love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. And it is through Christ that God is at work, liberating us from our sin, and sending us out into the world to share that good news with others.

God does not call us to be anything other than who God created us to be.

By healing her, Jesus gave Simon’s mother-in-law a second chance to be who she was created to be.

We are beings who are designed for being in community, who are instructed over and over in Scripture to care for those who are poor, those who are forgotten or neglected. Through Christ, we have a model of how to live our lives doing just that.

Following Christ’s example, we seek not to be served, but to serve.

We serve because it is part of *who we are meant to be.*

Each of us is equipped by the Spirit, strengthened by the Spirit, encouraged by the Spirit, and sent by the Spirit to do what we are called to do. And that same Spirit has given each of us various gifts — teaching, healing, gardening, fixing things, music, art, cooking — gifts to use along the way. Not for our glory, but for the glory of God.

When we embrace those gifts, we embrace who we are created to be.

When we use those gifts in service to our neighbor, in service to our community, we begin to live fully as who we are created to be.

When we dismantle systems that prevent some people from using their gifts, when we insist upon justice for *all* people, when we strive for peace in *all* of the world, we create a world in which *all* people can be the people God intended for them to be, the people God *created* them to be.

*That’s* loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Simon’s mother-in-law was constrained by social norms that many of us would not embrace today, yet she still serves as an example of how to be a disciple. With her second chance at life, came an opportunity for her to more fully live into her faith. She served God, and she served her family, and she served the friends that came along with Jesus and Simon and Andrew.

Today, we are constrained by the limits created by this pandemic. But with it comes a new chance to live more fully into our faith.

We should not assume that Simon’s mother-in-law continued her life just as she had before her illness. Encounters with God cannot help but change us.

Just the same, we should not assume that we will simply pick up our lives as they were before everything came to a halt last March.

The challenge set before us today is daunting. Figuring out how to use our gifts while staying safe. Figuring out how to encourage others to use *their* gifts while staying safe. And figuring out how we will more fully live into our faith from this moment forward, while encouraging the same for others.

I am convinced that each of us has gifts to share with each other, with this community, with this world, and that we can still do this even in the midst of a pandemic.

But this pandemic also gives us an opportunity to be creative, to dream, to imagine new ways of doing things. New ways of being together in community, both while we are physically apart ***and*** when we are able to be together again. New ways of encouraging each other to live fully into who each of us is created to be, both now and in the future.

We have been given a chance to rethink who we are as a community of faith. To dream new dreams and make them happen.

I do not believe that God brought this pandemic upon us, but I am certain that God *is* using it to shine light on the ways our sinful nature causes us to stray from being who God created us to be.

And I am equally sure that God is hopeful that our path forward will be one in which *all* of creation is able to thrive, in which *all* of us embrace our identity as beloved children of God, and in which *all* of us learn to love one another as we have been loved.

May it be so for us.